



FLY-FISHING WITH FROZEN FINGERS

The combination of ice, wind, snow, and lethargic fish makes the idea of chasing trout in midwinter seem absurd. Until you actually try it. [BY BEN ROMANS](#)

Sometimes it seems as though Montana has no fly-fishing secrets remaining, no adventures still to discover. Most of its big-name rivers are known throughout the world. Stories about many smaller streams and mountain lakes appear in fishing magazines and websites. Even the sometimes fantastic fishing of early spring and fall—insider’s knowledge once known only to locals—has become widely known.

What’s left for those of us who fish here regularly but still want to discover something new? How about this: Instead of looking for new water, consider fishing familiar streams and rivers at the most unlikely time of year—**winter**.

I’m already a big fan of winter, so getting me to fish during my favorite season requires little prodding. I especially enjoy the quiet. In addition to the lack of crowds—or even a single other angler, in many cases—the scenery and sounds of winter landscapes are muffled and muted by snow and ice. If you fly-fish at least partly for the serenity, you’ll want to learn how to do it during the cold months.

In winter, I want to be outside. Fiddling at my fly-tying bench staves off cabin fever for only so long. So I bundle up and head to my favorite river—if only for an hour or two. And even though peace and solitude are the main reasons I’m out there, I figure that as long as I’m fishing, I might as well catch a few fish.

Think warmth

Unfortunately, winter is not the best time to attract trout to a fly. The icy water slows the cold-blooded creatures’ metabolism, making them lethargic. Trout move less than in summer and aren’t as hungry.

Still, they can be caught. The key is knowing when to go.

The main thing to remember is that the warmer, the better. If the forecast is for daytime temperatures to drop below freezing, consider staying indoors until things warm up. Fish can be caught on cold days, but it’s a lot harder than during sunny winter

afternoons with temperatures in the upper 30s or higher. Warmer air and water mean more active aquatic insect activity, which, in turn, persuades fish to feed. What’s more, you can stay outdoors and fish longer in the more comfortable conditions.

To squeeze the most warmth out of a day, fish rivers or long portions of rivers that have the most sunshine hitting the water. The winter sun follows a southeastern-to-southwestern arc, warming primarily what gets hit by the rays. Rivers running north or south

have more sunshine on the water during daytime than those flowing east or west.

Both the Madison and Bitterroot Rivers flow northward with virtually no topography blocking the sun. They warm more quickly and stay warmer than, for example, the lower Blackfoot River. Flowing west and flanked by mountains and canyons, the lower Blackfoot receives virtually no sunshine in December and January. It’s also one of the last to wake from its winter slumber in spring.

The Missouri has examples of both.

Some portions below Craig run north for a mile or more, soaking up sunshine the entire way. Then the river suddenly cuts into a deep, dark canyon and the air temperature drops 20 degrees. That’s no place to spend a Sunday afternoon in January.

Tailwater trout

Another way to find warmer water is to fish tailwater fisheries, which are like gigantic spring creeks. The upstream reservoir provides the water source, which remains relatively constant through the year. As a result, ever-changing weather fronts don’t alter a trout’s daily routine downstream from dams nearly as much as on rivers without tailwater fisheries.

The state’s two top tailwaters are the Missouri below Holter Dam and the Bighorn below

Yellowtail Dam. On both, water temperatures drop no lower than the upper 30s through January, February, and March. “The water will cool a little a few miles after it leaves the dam, but I’ve only seen the river get shelf ice as far down as the Bighorn [Fishing Access Site], about 12 miles downstream,” says Duane Schreiner, owner of Bighorn Fly and Tackle in Fort Smith. “Fishing can be spectacular even at 10 and 20 below zero, but we generally try to convince people to fish when the air is at or above 30 degrees. Anything below that and you spend too much time keeping ice from freezing up your gear. The fish don’t quit hitting; it just becomes more bother than it’s worth.”

Another great tailwater is the Madison River from Hebgen Dam downstream to Quake Lake. Just 2 miles long, the stretch doesn’t hold a huge amount of fishable water. But because it’s so far from anything—the closest town, 20 minutes away, is sparsely populated West Yellowstone—you’ll likely have the river to yourself.

A different option is to fish a spring creek, where subterranean inputs keep the water at a constant 45 to 60 degrees F year-round. Though most spring creeks are closed to fishing from December 1 through the third Saturday in May, Armstrong, DuPuy, and Nelson Creeks, in the lower Paradise Valley of the Yellowstone River, remain open. These waters run completely through private property and cost users \$40 per day during winter months. Fee fishing may seem blasphemous in Montana, where open public stream and river access is gospel. But in midwinter, with few other options, paying to catch 18-inch rainbows on size-20 midge imitations doesn’t seem like the worst way to spend your money.

Another option—this one free of charge—is Poindexter Slough, a spring creek on mostly public land just outside Dillon.



A DIFFERENT SORT OF “FUN” Winter fly-fishing can be downright miserable. Counterclockwise from top right: Rod guides regularly ice up; flies become too frigid to hold; and ice builds up on wading boot bottoms to the point where walking becomes treacherous. The payoff from all this misery comes when you hook a nice fish on a sunny day and think about how much more fun it is than watching TV.

Whether it’s a spring creek, a tailwater, or just a regular trout river on a sunny day, don’t fish too early. This isn’t August, when trout go into a stupor by noon. In winter you want to fish during the heat of the day, when a trout’s metabolism increases as the water temperature rises, even if only by a few degrees. Sleep in, have another cup of coffee, do some chores, and maybe eat an early lunch. Then fish when the sun is highest and temperatures climb—typically between 11 a.m. and when the sun’s rays no longer hit the water.

Go deep, then deeper

As river temperatures drop and winter flows settle to the lowest of the year, most trout congregate in deep pools and runs. Fish slip

10 top winter flies

With the exception of the Woolly Bugger streamer and the Griffith’s Gnat midge-imitating dry fly, all the patterns here are nymphs. In most cases, winter fishing takes place below the water surface.

- ▶ Pat’s Rubber Legs
- ▶ Beadhead Prince Nymph
- ▶ Beadhead Pheasant Tail Nymph
- ▶ Copper John
- ▶ San Juan Worm
- ▶ Glo Bug
- ▶ Zebra Midge
- ▶ Griffith’s Gnat
- ▶ Woolly Bugger
- ▶ Ray Charles Scud



COPPER JOHN



ZEBRA MIDGE

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: VICTOR SCHELDEL; BEN PIERCE; DUŠAN SMETANA; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; DUŠAN SMETANA



WHATEVER IT TAKES As snowpack increases, just reaching trout water can be the biggest challenge. Snowshoes will help, but usually all that’s required is high-stepping through a few yards of deep snow.

under cavernous undercut banks, beneath logjams, and into any long, profound, gravel-strewn trench with slow flows. Trout survive winter by conserving calories. Fish for them in holding waters where they can find safety from predators and feed without expending too much valuable energy.

Winter trout also seek spots where natural springs or adjacent sloughs send in water warmer than the icy river. “Think about summer, when you were wading or walking down the bank, and you suddenly felt a rush of cooler water around your feet and legs,” says Jim Cox, co-owner of Kingfisher Fly Shop in Missoula. “That’s natural spring water seeping into the system. In the cold months of winter, that turns into a warmer spot where fish gravitate.”

After finding likely holding water, you need to get your presentation to the fish. Cox recommends using two-fly nymph rigs. By mimicking two different food sources, you double your chance of getting a strike. For example, a Beadhead Pheasant Tail nymph might not interest a trout, but the buggy-looking Pat’s Rubber Legs tied on 12 inches away might look tasty enough to eat.

Two-fly rigs also allow you to cover different water levels. A heavy nymph at the end of the tippet helps pull a lighter nymph like a scud imitation or Copper John tied a foot or so up the tippet down toward the bottom. The big fly works like a split shot, except, unlike the lead sinker, it can also catch fish. The heavier fly will drop down into deeper pockets or slots, too.

Strike indicators are essential. They let you know if your fly is bouncing along the streambed bottom, where trout spend most of their time. If the indicator twitches and vibrates during a drift, you know your flies are moving among subsurface rocks. If the indicator just floats smoothly, the flies are too high in the water column, where trout rarely swim. Adding a split shot to your tippet gets the flies deeper.

The most important value of the indicator is to let you know when a fish takes your fly. Trout strike lightly in winter, sometimes biting then spitting out an artificial nymph in less than a second. Without an indicator—

Ben Romans is the author of Montana’s Best Fly-Fishing. He lives in Boise, Idaho.

Don’t die out there

The combination of moving water, slippery surfaces, and icy temperatures is dangerous. Hypothermia is the biggest risk, but drowning is right up there, too. Tips for making sure you survive your winter fly-fishing adventures:

- ▶ Always tell someone where you’re going and when you expect to return. Offer as many details as possible.
- ▶ Prepare for the worst. Bring backup clothes and a fire-starting kit in case you take a spill or your waders leak.
- ▶ Dress much, much more warmly than you think you should. Even on sunny, relatively warm days, you will cool down fast when standing near and especially in a river—despite neoprene waders. Wear heavy fleece pants and jackets and avoid jeans and other cotton pants or undergarments. Cotton absorbs moisture and won’t insulate when wet. Combine a breathable raincoat over a down vest or jacket. A heavy wool or fleece cap is also a good idea.
- ▶ Keeping your fingers warm is the biggest challenge. Use thick fleece

fingerless gloves with mitten tops you can pull over your exposed digits when you don’t need dexterity. Yes, you can cast and reel line with mittens.

- ▶ Use a wading staff. Even if you never consider one in summer, a staff is vital in winter, when boulders ice up and banks are especially slippery. Remember, in winter a slip and fall into icy water can spell disaster.
- ▶ Bring a thermos of hot coffee, tea, or hot chocolate. After a few hours in the cold, it’s easier to warm up from the inside out than from the outside in.



FIRE UP Bring matches and a fire-starting kit so you can build a body-warming blaze if you get wet or chilled.

midge dry-fly fishing with the same respect he gives to fishing caddis and mayflies in summer. “Midge fishing is always best on a warm, overcast day, because you don’t have shadows to contend with,” says Mathews, who fishes at least two days a week, even in winter. He explains that if your fly rod or fly line throws a shadow over a rising trout, the fish will spook and stop feeding. “But if it’s a little overcast, you can get away with a little more,” Mathews says.

“The beauty of winter midge fishing,” Mathews adds, “is the fish lock into narrow feeding lanes, so if you crouch low as you walk you can get close. Then I kneel down or sit. I like to see the fish’s eyeballs—I get that



LEFT TO RIGHT: DUŠAN SMETANA; LANCE SORESEN

close. Then I make short casts and presentations, almost simply dapping the fly. I just use a little fly line and my leader out of the rod tip.”

Mathews says this technique is ideally suited for a tenkara rod. Tenkara is a traditional Japanese style of fly-fishing growing more popular throughout the United States. A tenkara angler uses only a slender 12- to 15-foot rod and a fixed length of line tied to the end—no reels or rod guides. It’s a lot like the cane pole fishing of old but with a high-tech telescopic carbon rod.

“Tenkara is perfect for winter midge fishing,” Mathews says. “I’ve fished as cold as 22 below zero on the Madison, and that’s

where something like tenkara techniques and equipment come in handy. You’re fishing a short, fixed-length cast, and you don’t have to worry about your reel or guides freezing up.”

Mathews says most midge action is in soft water along banks and fringes of fast-water chutes. “Find a place where fish are comfortable rising, near relatively calm, moderately deep water, and spend the afternoon there. In my experience on the Madison, fish prefer water closer to the bank, in protected areas, where they don’t have to expend too much energy.”

Mathews puts floatant on his leader to keep it on the surface but uses a water-

Is this river or stream open to fishing?

Before setting foot in any water during the winter months, check Montana’s fishing regulations. While most major rivers remain open to fishing year-round, many tributary streams are closed from December 1 until the third Saturday in May.

Trout harvested from winter’s cold water taste better than at any other time of the year. If you decide to release your catch, keep it submerged at all times to prevent stress from the frigid air temperature.

absorbing powder like Frog’s Fanny to keep the imitation buoyant. “Floatant just mats down the fibers of a small, sparse midge dry,” he says.

One challenge is to keep track of your imitation fly among the thousands of naturals floating on the surface around it. If you lose sight of your fly, don’t despair. “Quite often the adult midge naturals will cling to your leader, so if you don’t see your fly and a trout takes it, you still might see a long line of naturals on the water sort of jerk forward,” Mathews says. “It’s kind of like bobber fishing with a natural, live bobber.”

Mathews recommends midge patterns with shucks. “From what I’ve seen, fish feeding on midges mostly take the impaired adults, cripples, and stillborns,” he says.

Other than that, go with the simplest patterns, such as a Zelon Midge. “That’s important,” Mathews says. “Fish tend to ignore complex midge pupae and adult patterns and just want something simple.”

Keeping at least a few aspects of winter fly-fishing uncomplicated is a good idea. Fishing during the cold months is definitely more difficult and cumbersome than in summer. It requires more clothing, more patience, and, considering the ever-present risk of hypothermia, far more attention to safety (see sidebar on page 32). But for some of us, the bother is worthwhile. The crowds are gone, and you’re outside in a river with a fly rod in hand.

Besides, if nothing else, fly-fishing during a few chilly days in midwinter makes you appreciate a sunny summer afternoon on the water all that much more. 🐾